

65 Landholding in New France : The Seignorial System

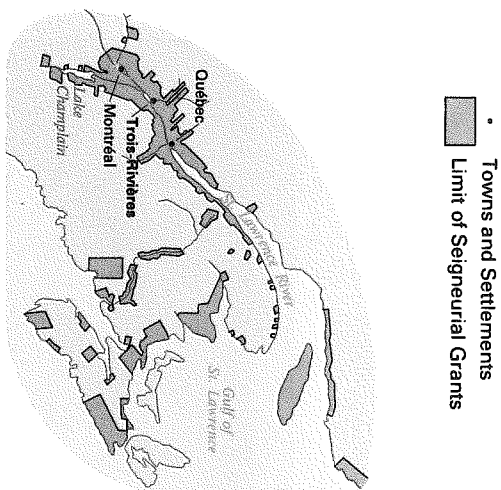
The seignorial system, which governed landholding in New France, was transplanted from France. Seigneur means lord and under this system all land was governed by lords who were responsible to the king. Thus, New France seemed much like a feudal colony, with no settler an absolute owner of the land that he farmed.

However, there were some differences. The French king's control over his colony was limited and the whole system adapted to the completely different conditions of a largely unexplored continent. For example, in France a seigneur's inherited wealth and prestige were things that his tenants were unlikely to attain. In New France, such differences were more easily overcome. Individuals could gain prestige and wealth in the fur trade and often become seigneurs in the bargain.

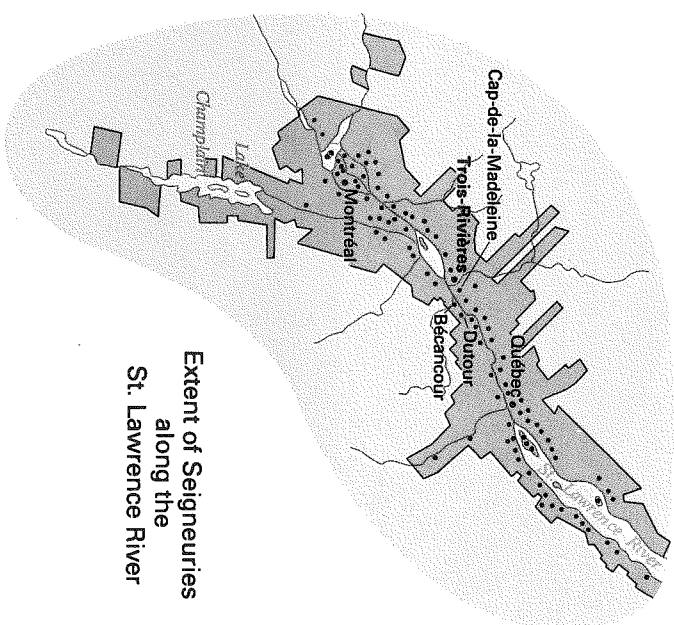
Perhaps the self-reliance required by life on the frontier helped to make the settlers more independent than the peasants of France. This tendency was reinforced by the actual pattern of settlement. As the map on the right shows, most settlement occurred along the rivers, lakefronts and coastlines which provided the only real means of communication and transport. Although each *habitant* lived close to his neighbours and was part of a strong community, each farm was also on the edge of the wilderness.

In New France the seignorial system did not produce the intended feudal replica of French rural society. The evidence suggests that by the time of the British conquest of New France, the seigneur's original role had become less important.

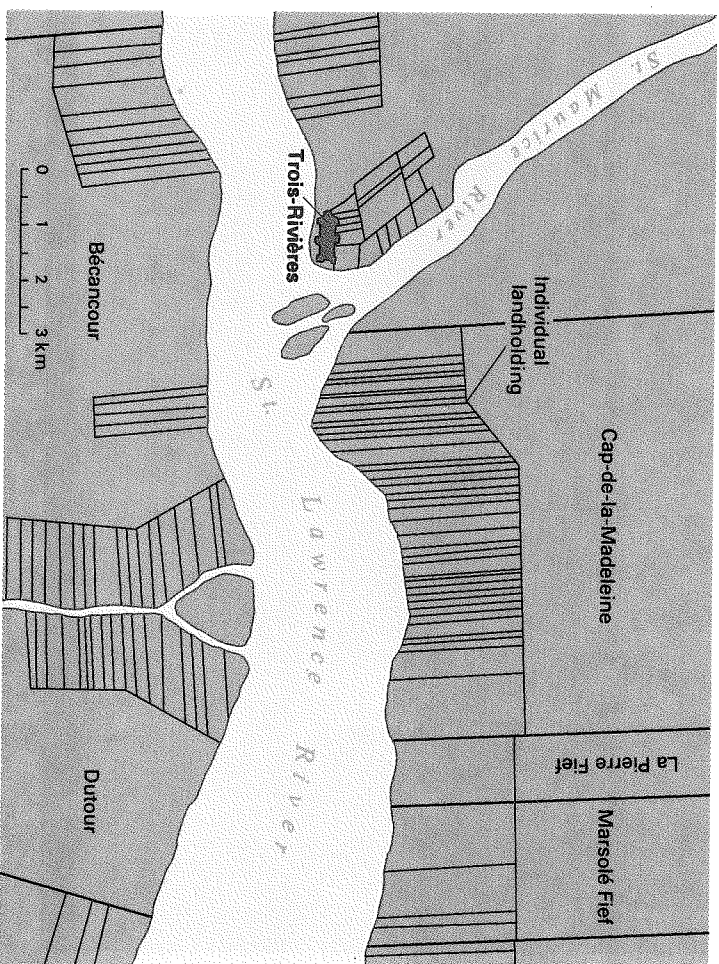
The earliest seigneuries were established around Québec, Trois-Rivières and Montréal between 1625 and 1650. Some were small, and others, such as Cap-de-la-Madeleine near Trois-Rivières, were very large. By 1672, the creation of seigneuries along both banks of the St. Lawrence was basically complete. The last seigneuery was granted in 1788, well after the fall of New France, and the system was not abolished until 1854.



Extent of Seigneuries of New France



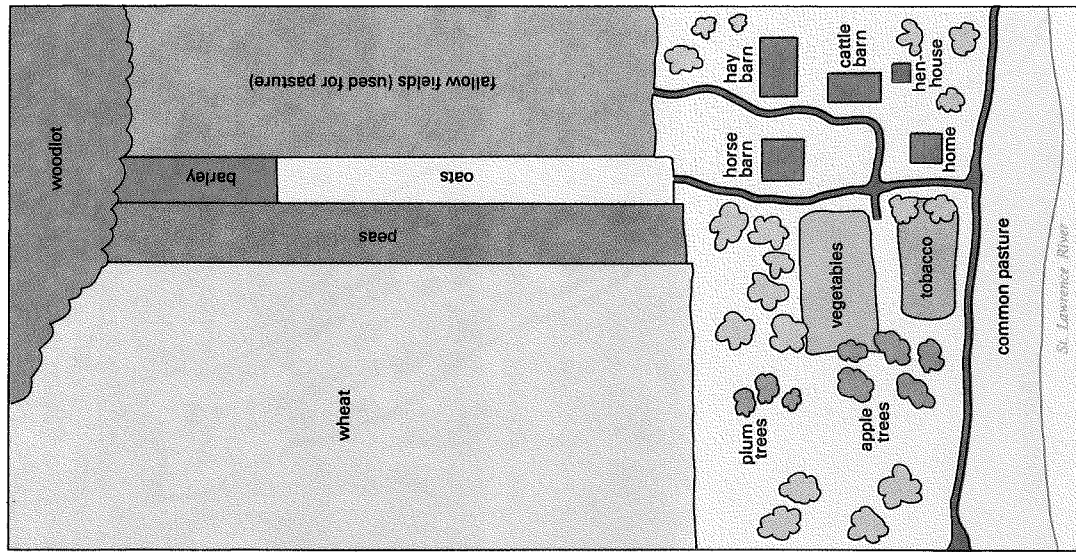
Extent of Seigneuries along the St. Lawrence River



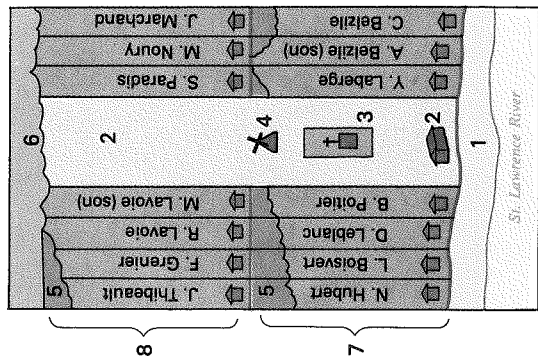
Seignorial Settlement — The Trois-Rivières Region 1709

The map on the right shows a small seigneurie. Farm land was laid out around the central space occupied by the seigneur's house and domain, by the church and by the mill. As you can see, this open plan facilitated movement throughout the seigneurie. The individual holdings, or *rotures*, were narrow strips with woodlots at the far end of each one. The *rotures* formed two ranges, the first fronting the river, and the second, settled later, fronting a local road parallel to the river. Common land for pasture was granted to the tenants as a group.

A seigneur could profit from his seigneurie. In addition to the money he raised from taxation of his tenants, he could collect dues from the mill where all grain was ground, from bake ovens, from wine sales, or from hunting and fishing rights. He could not use unconceded land to enlarge his own domain, and any mineral or timber rights belonged to the Crown. A seigneur's duty was to colonize his fief and report his progress to the intendant of the colony.



Roture of André Belzile

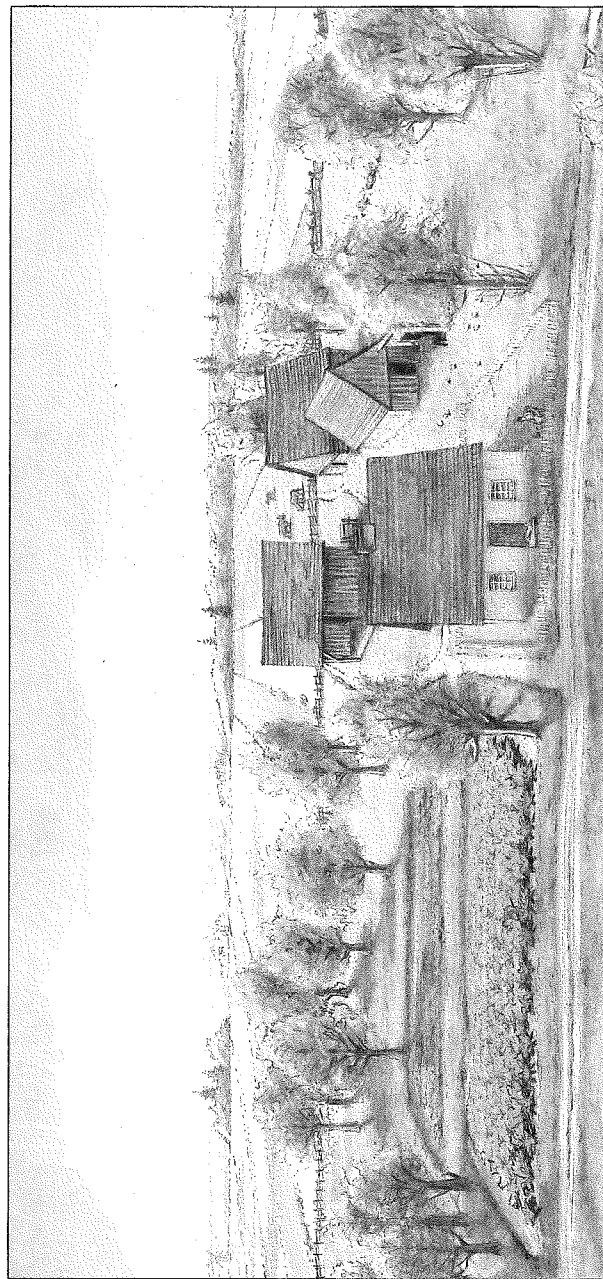


An 18th Century Seigneurie

The main crops grown were peas, wheat, oats and barley. Most farms also included a kitchen garden stocked with a good variety of root and leafy vegetables; onions and tobacco were particularly prized. The *habitant* usually had his own orchard of apple trees and, if the climate allowed, other fruit varieties as well.

Most farms kept six cows and two oxen for domestic purposes. However, the proximity of a market for small surpluses of dairy produce could cause the number of cows to rise as high as twenty. Horses were popular with those who could afford them. Pigs and poultry were universal.

Although farmers were rarely wealthy, the life of the *habitant* family compared favourably with that of its European cousins. While life was simple (for example, most clothing was homemade from furs and local cloth), most people were well fed. During the prosperous mid-1700's most could look forward to a steadily improving standard of living.



Artist's conception of the roture of André Belzile